

ETHNO-GRAPHING THE PASTORAL: GLORIA NAYLOR'S MAMA DAY

POONAM PUNIA

Assistant Professor of English, JCD Memorial P. G College, Sirsa, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

Afro-American slave history and its socio-cultural apparatus remained unrecognized owing to the white man's burden as most slaves were illiterate and not allowed to speak out. Consequently, their narratives were a frantic struggle to maintain or claim their cultural legacy, identity, and humanity in a racist system that had denied them these. Gloria Naylor's literary novels are rooted in southern heritage in pastoral tradition. Mama Day marks Naylor's departure for new geographic and thematic terrain. The novel strives to re-establish the importance of southern culture and nature in Afro-American identity. This article focuses on the intricacies within Afro-American's culture in nature and nature in culture by creating an environment in which the richness of folk value system can be explored. The novel provides close portrait of everyday black folk and reveal the richness of the black culture and inherent strengths of the black community whose lives are sometimes reduced merely to the struggle for survival. The southern land holds such a prominent position in Mama Day that these characters are narrated as a part of the pastoral landscape. Her characters George, Cocoa and Mama Day present a larger social framework

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INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor's novels provide a close portrait of everyday black folk and reveal the richness of the black culture and inherent strengths of the black community whose lives are sometimes reduced merely to the struggle for survival. Naylor has included African belief systems and rituals still central to Afro-American life and has used folklore to explore the web of complexities within her culture through nature. It records the progress of black folk culture in depth through the illustrations of Willow Springs and its residents in one of her most representative work *Mama Day*. Her characters George, Cocoa and Mama Day present a larger social. The southern land holds such a prominent position in *Mama Day* that these characters are narrated as a part of the pastoral landscape.

The pastoral setting of the novel and the portrayal of the time, place, and environ of what is taking place are essential to the understanding of the true spirit of a novel. The setting is most important to the novel as it establishes the grounds for some diverse perspectives and realities of Naylor's major characters. The setting within *Mama Day* is shown through the vibrant description of the island of Willow Springs, whereas the use of New York City as a contrasting world to that of the natural-cultural island, and the separate environment and boundaries that are created regarding the spiritual "other place". The island of Willow Springs becomes a place throughout the novel that is real and full of life for its inhabitants.

Gloria Naylor, as an Afro-American, has profound correlation with her southern roots and cultural heritage. The spirit of the Afro-American pastoral is exemplified by familiarity and awareness with the earth. Therefore, the pastoral element of her life has been most evident in her novels as her southern heritage.

Understanding that southern life in many ways describes the Afro-American experiences. Hence Naylor feels gratified to confine the pastoral spirit in all of her work. Nonetheless, she knows that:

The black community is diverse and all facets of black life should be explored. This newer generation will be further and further removed from its southern roots, and with this shift there will be less interest in those working class struggles that so often are related to the racial conflicts so well known in the South. (*Mama Day* 12)

In this regard, in order to preserve her native culture and its various facets in the heart and mind of the coming generations who are under the influence of white culture, Naylor has presented her novel with the flavor of the cultural heritage of Afro-Americans having pastoral values, in the form of oral tradition, story-telling, supernatural elements and ancestral presence. Henry Louis Gates asserts that: "In the history of the Afro-American literary tradition, perhaps no other author has been more immersed in the formal history of that tradition than Gloria Naylor" (*Mama Day* ix).

Mama Day who is a witty old lady and believes in family, cultural heritage and has a deep understanding of nature, emerges as a healer with 'roots' in the past, strength in the present, and insight into the future. Her healing powers rise above the world of science and verge on the magical. She is the girl of "second sight" (*Mama Day* 14), and has "gifted hands" (88). She uses these hands not only to care for the sick, to deliver babies but also to cultivate gardens. Mama Day sees magic in the woods on the island; she sees trees and flowers fluttering and hears them whispering. Mama Day has the spirit of all good things – respect for life, family and nature, a comprehension of the way to harness natural forces and an acceptance of death. She symbolically serves as the giver of life for the inhabitants of the island. Mama Day is not a biological mother; her position as a creator is established through her close connection to the natural world. Mama Day's healing powers are derived from the world of nature, from the plants which she transforms into medicine, from the chickens that surround her house, from the trees and the birds of the forest. As Ralph Reckley points out Miranda (Mama) Day communicates with all of nature, "Mama Day's dialogue is all inclusive. She talks to the wind, plants, animals, and her dead ancestors" (88). Mama Day is a conjure woman, mid-wife and an emotional mother for the island. The historical connection runs from the renowned free spirits who founded the community like Sapphira Wade, through Miranda Day to Ophelia. They have linked the gap of ancestral conjuring with African roots and the spiritual milieu of their forefathers, thereby creating a healing narrative. Marjorie Pryse terms them as "metaphorical conjure women" (5).

Mama Day's pastoral setting is in the southern landscape and it strives to reestablish the importance of southern place in Afro-American identity. The world of Afro-American emerges from the wilderness. Therefore, it is closely linked to nature and black cultural and communal traditions. In the framework of pastoral study, Afro-American heritage is largely defined by oral traditions and folklore. Africans brought in as slaves to work on the plantations in the New World struggled to maintain their cultural heritage by adopting pastoral values and transforming them to functional and acceptable forms in the Europeanized environment of the New World. Bernard Bell points out, "The Afro-American novel is not only a branch of the Euro-American novel, but also a development of the Afro-American oral tradition" (*The Afro American Novel and Its Tradition* xiii). In oral tradition, folklore is an identity-forming, knowledge-sharing strategy that lays emphasis on morality and story-telling practices and is strongly employed by native societies. In the hands of the post-modern writers, it is used as an essential dimension of cultural and literary experiences and an influential tool in the preservation of both history and culture. But for marginalized blacks these also became a survival mode as folktales are a means of creating a cultural identity outside printed history. The folklorist Bernard Bell asserts that folktales:

Transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society. (*The Contemporary Afro-American Novel* 73)

Gloria Naylor in *Mama Day* employs folklore and nature as the agents of Afro-American culture. *Mama Day* focuses on the supernatural natural elements, storytelling, folklorist traditions and healing with herbs. In southern communities, the story-telling inspires the oral performances as in story-telling and the story tellers communicate their experiences in order to secure possession of events that belong to them. In *Mama Day*, the story-telling is carried out in the culturally separate Afro-American community of Willow Springs, a renowned sea island where the Day family has lived since slavery. The story of Sapphira Wade rules over the island's history. In the myth, a slave woman Sapphira was married to Boscombe Wade and after bearing seven sons from him, she murdered him. Those children are the heirs of Willow Springs blessed with some magical powers.

The inhabitants of the island reaffirm the myth to each generation to guarantee its firmness. They value their past through their relationships with one another. The oral myth of Sapphira Wade attributes to Willow Springs the rootedness in the past. The saga of the island is significant in its adverse portrayal of heroism. Sapphira's great courage is responsible for the survival of Willow Springs. Susan Meisenhelder states that Sapphira:

Not only asserted both her autonomous ethnic and gender identity by defying her position as a slave and freeing herself from her white master; but through her heroic actions in securing the land from her descendents, she also made possible their freedom and cultural independence. (1440-48)

The island's cultural traditions are communicated through folklore. The black world of Willow Springs carries on Cocoa and George's spiritual power to continue their talking and listening even after their death. It is predictable that Cocoa and George both have physical presence in the story, but in reality, they have been dead all through the novel. Cocoa has been talking to him in her family grave and in Willow Springs and he also responds from the graveyard. Cocoa's role as a story listener to her physically dead husband produces a kind of discourse of doubt in Afro-American fiction. As Virginia Fowler says, "The silent conversation between the dead George and the living Cocoa that comprises much of the narrative points to the African belief system operating in Willow Springs" (94). Willow Springs tracks the oral production where ancestors serve as models for telling and listening. The African mothers use to define the oral tradition of story-telling to make it clear those cultural values which have been passed down from one generation to another. *Mama Day* communicates and remains in touch with the dead.

Several spiritual beliefs such as conjure, Voodoo and Hoodoo played an imperative role in Afro-American culture. Naylor is highly influenced with her pastoral legacy in her observation of women. Her cultural heritage helps her in creating types of characters who carry within themselves these pastoral features of their culture. Conjure addresses in literary writing the undervaluation of African medicinal practices and belief systems, not only in relation to medicine, but also to ancestry, religion and signifying practices. Lindsey Tucker "prefers to view conjure as being comprised of practices which are natural using plants to cure and unnatural using spells and charms" (173-88). Morrison too has invested Pilate with such supernatural powers in *Song of Solomon*. *Mama Day* explores the theme in her novel to a greater extent. The pastoral elements are strongly relevant to Naylor's *Mama Day*. The novel uses four qualities – oral quality, participation of the reader, the chorus and the presence of ancestors. These qualities are highly relevant to the pastoral legacy with its emphasis on "the process of story-telling, linked with the community and cultural background, and

interaction with the reader” (Foreman 286), and proximity with nature.

Mama Day brings to the fore African myths and beliefs like conjuring and Voodoo practices, folklore and story-telling as a pastoral element. Naylor employs pastoral to re-vision their past and its strength. In an interview, Naylor has affirmed the pastoral legacies in the form of magic realism in *Mama Day*:

I moved from the most universally accepted forms of magic into those things that we’re more resistant to accepting.... That’s where there are indeed women who can work with nature and create things which have not been documented by institutions of science, but which still do happen. So, the book’s an exploration of magic. (Perry 233)

It advocates a heritage both to those black people who are culturally orphaned, cut off from their pastoral traditions, and to those who are linked genealogically to the black American culture. *Mama Day* is the blend of the supernatural world of the South, Willow Springs Island and the realistic world of the North, New York City. These natural and supernatural codes pass through multiple boundaries between the spiritual and the material, animate and inanimate, life and death, and eventually between rural south and urban north.

Talking about pastoral setting of Willow Springs, it is a fictitious setting in the novel, a little island off the coast of the United States. It is located between Georgia and South Carolina and seems to be running at its own pace. The island’s inhabitants experience a link of past, present and future and its spiritual life remains bound within the distorted geographical location. They focus on faith and pastoral spirituality and live on the land which is cultivated by their ancestors and where these ancestors are buried.

The ecstasy of the novel is established from the beginning, which forces the reader to imagine a world and the concept of reality. The time of the events was summer, fourteen years ago when Cocoa comes from New York with her husband George to visit her aunt, Mama Day. The time is now August 1999: “It’s August 1999 – ain’t put a slim chance it’s the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own” (*Mama Day* 10). The story of the novel takes place at New York and at Willow Springs. The story in New York records the life of George and Cocoa with their first meeting and marriage. Their life signifies the urban world which contrasts with the natural world of Willow Springs.

After visiting Mama Day in Willow Springs, George realizes the strangeness of the place on the island and says, “I had to be there and see-no, feel – that I was entering another world” (175). The visit across the bridge at Willow Springs takes George into a new and unknown world which suggests perpetuity, the specific meaning and spirituality of the place full of vagueness and bizarre events. Mama Day’s family has been living on the island for centuries. Mama Day serves as a link between the inhabitants on the island and the outer world. She is an elegant, sensible old woman for the inhabitants of the island who has wits about the good and bad for the community. She represents a pastoral, nostalgic recollected memory and admiration for the folkloric Afro-American literature. Biologically, she has no children; she is everybody’s mama. Her given name Miranda, “worker of wonders” (Wall n.pg.) bespeaks her power to assist even in the creation of life. Mama Day mediates between the pastoral cultures of Willow Springs and Manhattan, as she does between the past and the present.

In Afro-American culture, witchcraft and conjuring have a great position. The female ancestors of Mama Day exhibited skills of casting spells and had remedies for healing. Mama Day reveals the power of witchcraft and healers as a conjure woman. She carries on the tradition of conjure which has passed down through the generations of the Mama Day

family. Miranda goes down from a long line of conjurers both men and women. Her father John Paul was the seventh son of Jonah, who was also the seventh son. Jonah's mother, Sapphira Wade was a commanding conjure woman whose inheritance powers took on god like qualities. She had the skill to read signs and could feel changes in nature that communicated to her the signs of unpredictable events. Her closeness to nature foregrounds the ethnic perception of the pastoral in the novel. Her vision is her consciousness of the behavior of plant and animal life. She traced the signs of the coming hurricane, not because of supernatural ability, but with her ability to read the actual signs of nature. Mama Day has extraordinary psychic abilities to forecast the unknown future. Her perception is also strong enough to foresee tragedies and odd consequences in the future. She also has a strong third sense about George's visit in Willow Springs that might have terrible consequences. It is an unpleasant thought and her inner apprehension scares her as she infers there is nothing she can do about it. A few days later, while Mama Day is enjoying the company of George and Cocoa, the conceptual intuition is finally shaping into a concrete thought: "DEATH. Miranda feels death all around her.... This here was real death. But whose? It didn't have to be a who – it could be a what" (*Mama Day* 226).

Besides being a conjure woman, Mama Day is also a healer. The inhabitants have full trust in Mama Day's remedies and respect her for her healing skills. Mama Day does magical pregnancies in an easy manner. The occurrence of the supernatural is chiefly concentrated in "the Other Place", the Days' old house where Miranda and Abigail used to live as children. "The Other Place" is a meeting point between the real and unreal world where the surprising and amazing actions take place. For the pregnancy of a local woman, Bernice, Mama Day uses her mystical power and natural herbs. She looks after Bernice and get ready for the final healing element. With the help of imperceptible ancient spiritual hands, Mama Day performs a ritual. She seems to be holding a chicken on her lap. Hens and eggs are the symbol of fertility. The ritual is pretty strange. Bernice strips down nude and rests her head on the pillow. She feels someone's hand in her body. The unique power of "the Other Place" and the presence of an aberrant spirit serve as mediators between Mama Day and Bernice. "The Other Place" is connected to ancestral spirits that is an inseparable part of the island's history and its pastoral heritage.

The existence of the figure of the ancestor functions as an agent between the present and the past. The role of ancestral spirits in the healing process is valuable and supportive. Naylor constructs the imaginary character of Sapphira Wade, who is Mama Day's great grandmother. Her ancestral tone of voice is present on the Willow Springs. She is a legend who left by wind. Sapphira was "a prototype of ideal black woman" who secured the land for her descendants, "freeing herself from her white master" (Meisenholder "False Gods and Black Goddesses in Naylor's *Mama Day* and Hurston's *TEWG*", 1440-48). Mama Day uses her ancestral supernatural powers and the presence of Sapphira as a legendary power in Bernice's pregnancy. Sapphira's spirit is also being felt in the destructive storm which comes to Willow Springs and tears down the bridge to the mainland.

CONCLUSIONS

Naylor's *Mama Day* has offered the maintenance of their culture in black society through oral history, storytelling and the presence of ancestors, which bring the Afro-Americans closer to their natural-cultural heritage. She focuses on the ins and outs within Afro-American culture and creates an environment in which the richness of black folk culture can be searched. She has spotted and drawn on a sense of distinguishing black cosmology and folklore. Thus, we see Gloria Naylor like many other writers did, uses the pastoral to romanticize the mystical. The apocalyptic sites of southern plantations are problematized by being used as sites of spirituality and healing. These anti-urban and sub-urban locations

explore pastoral histories. While the male authors largely reject pastoral settings and move away from a rural location for increased freedom, growth and independence as Du Bois, Wright Ellison, James Baldwin, Afro-American woman writers evolve the pastoral as a part of nostalgic inheritance.

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